

Make It As Secure As You Can

Matthew 27:57-66

GA. Studdert-Kennedy once wrote a poem entitled, "Indifference." With apologies to him, I have changed the poem ever so slightly in order to read it to you today:

*When Jesus came to Golgotha they hanged Him on a tree,
They drove great nails through hands and feet, and made a Calvary;
They crowned Him with a crown of thorns, red were His wounds and deep,
For those were crude and cruel days, and human flesh was cheap.*

*When Jesus came to _____, they simply passed Him by,
They never hurt a hair of Him, they only let Him die;
For men had grown more tender, and they would not give Him pain,
They only just passed down the street, and left Him in the rain.*

*Still Jesus cried, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,"
And still it rained the winter rain that drenched them through and through;
The crowds went home and left the streets without a soul to see,
And Jesus crouched against a wall and cried for Calvary.*

Indifference. That's a polite way to say that many people just simply ignore Jesus Christ. And to ignore Him, they must ignore the Resurrection. What about the large number of people who have read the Gospels? For the most part, they remain lost *not* because have sought the truth about the Resurrection, and then decided it was all a myth, but because they have just *ignored* the truth.

It was difficult for the chief priests and Pharisees to ignore Jesus. It was difficult to ignore someone who came running into the Temple and began beating the money-changers and turning over their money boxes. It was difficult to ignore someone who called you a blind guide and a hypocrite in front of a huge crowd. It was difficult to ignore someone who was a constant and very real threat to your power and authority. And they couldn't ignore Jesus any longer.

So they had Him crucified.

But that did not seem to be enough. They remembered the Galilean's claims that after three days He would rise again. In fact, the chief priests and Pharisees

remembered that claim better than the disciples did. They knew that unless they did something, that tomb would be empty come Sunday morning. They did their very best to make that tomb as secure as they could, to keep Jesus in the grave.

But they couldn't. They just couldn't.

My heart is joyful on this day when we celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. But with a pastor's heart I am burdened because of the people who claim allegiance to our church who are trying to keep Jesus in the tomb today. They are trying to ignore the power of the Risen Christ. They are doing all they can to make sure that the Power of the Risen Lord stays locked up, out of sight, out of mind, out of the way. We don't like a Jesus Who runs around loose in the world.

You might be thinking to yourself, "Those are pretty strong words. I hope that preacher knows what he's talking about."

I do. I do, because I've done it myself. I've tried to make the tomb, so to speak, as secure as I could, so Jesus wouldn't interfere with what I wanted to do. Now, it doesn't relieve the guilt any on my part, but you've done the same thing. As Francis Chan has written, "The God of the universe—the creator of nitrogen and pine needles, galaxies and e-minor—loves us with a radical, unconditional, self-sacrificing love. And what is our typical response? We go to church, sing songs, and try not to cuss." There should be much more to following Christ than that, don't you think?

There are many ways we go about it, but I believe the Scripture passage before us today shows us three ways we try to ignore the Risen Christ in our lives today.

1 By acting as though He were not alive

Verse 57 of this passage tells us that Joseph of Arimathea was a rich man, and that he was a disciple of Jesus. We see in verse 58 that Joseph went to Pilate to request that the body of Jesus be handed over to him. That took a lot of courage, because the bodies of those crucified were normally denied burial. They were just taken down from the cross and thrown down the hill, where the birds would come and pick the bones. Joseph was risking his very life to do something like that, and that was admirable. John's Gospel tells us that Nicodemus helped Joseph of Arimathea prepare the body for burial, winding the body in a clean linen shroud with spices of myrrh and aloes.

But notice something. John tells us that Nicodemus brought approximately 72 pounds of spices to anoint the body of Jesus—enough to bury a king. It was a very costly burial that Joseph and Nicodemus gave to Jesus, and though it was a very loving act, still it is obvious that they did not expect Jesus to come back to life. You see, the spices were used to combat the odors of a decaying body, and if Jesus was to rise again, His body would not decay.

Joseph and Nicodemus did not just place the body of Jesus in a convenient spot until He should rise again. They buried Him, and they fully expected Him to remain dead.

It's not exactly the same, but we are guilty of something similar when we conduct our lives as though Jesus were still in the grave—with no power, no light, no love, no expectation. It may not be that we actually say that Jesus is still dead, that He never really rose from the dead. But what we do see are people—and you and I are often included—who just simply act and live and talk as though Jesus is not alive.

And when we do that, we are wrapping up our commitments, our convictions, and our consciences in a shroud of death and sin, and we think that by doing that, Jesus won't bother us anymore. And just as those spices were used by Nicodemus to combat the odors of a decaying body, in the same way, you and I are often guilty of trying to “spice” up our lives with activity and business and so-called pleasurable habits, in order to cover up the fact that our souls are decaying, and are stinking before the nostrils of God!

Go ahead! Make it as secure as you can. Make it as secure as you know how. Act as though Jesus were not alive today. Act as if He were just some character in a dusty storybook. Go ahead! It won't change one little thing! Jesus will still be alive, and you'll still be dead!

Jesus is alive, no matter how you and I act about the matter. I can act as though the sun did not come up this morning, but no matter how I act the truth remains: the sun came up. If I do not choose to benefit from the sunshine, the truth remains: the sun is in the sky.

We can act as though the Son of God did not come up from the grave. But no matter how we act, the truth remains: He's alive! We can stay inside the darkness of sin, and not benefit from the Power of the Resurrected Life, but Jesus is alive! Catch the glory of that Reality! And begin today to give your life in the service of the King!

2 By confining Him to a certain area of our lives

Verses 62-63 tell us that the chief priests and Pharisees went before Pilate in one body and said, “Sir, we remember how that imposter said while He was still alive, ‘After three days I will rise again.’ Therefore, order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come and steal Him away.”

I believe that the enemies of Jesus fully expected Him to come back to life, and that they thought that if they could only get Pilate’s official cooperation, that Jesus, even if He was alive, could be confined to that tomb. When they said “we remember He said He would rise again after three days,” they made it clear that they knew what Jesus meant when He said, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” They knew Jesus was referring to the temple of His body, even though they had perverted those words at His trial.

The excuse they used before Pilate was that they were afraid that the disciples would come and steal the body, and then claim He was alive. But that is all it was—just an excuse. It was not very likely that those disciples, as few and as terrified as they were, would dare show their faces. Remember that nearly all of them ran from the trial and the cross!

Pilate reminded the chief priests and Pharisees that they already had a temple guard of soldiers, and he told them that they could use them. He told them, “Make it as secure as you can.” What did Pilate mean by those words? Was he being sarcastic, or did he have an idea in the back of his head just how futile the Jews’ efforts would be?

Whatever Pilate meant, it was obvious that the chief priests and Pharisees were doing their best to keep Jesus in the tomb, to confine Him to that grave carved out of the side of a hill. If they could do that, this story about the Resurrection would be squelched.

So the Scripture tells us that they took their temple police, and they went and made the tomb of Jesus as secure as they knew how, by sealing the stone and then posting a guard of soldiers.

The stone was used as the door of the tomb. It was a boulder, heavy enough to keep out individuals and animals. Joseph and Nicodemus had put the stone there as part of the burial. But now the stone is sealed. A cord was passed around the stone

and was fastened to the two sides of the entrance with clay, so that the stone could not be removed without breaking the seals or the cord. Then, to make sure that any intrusion would be detected, the official seal of the priests was placed there, impressed into the clay before it dried.

We try to confine Jesus to the tomb, or to a certain area of our lives, and we roll the stone of our sin across the door of our hearts, and we place the seal of a dead conscience on it to make sure no hymn, no choir special, no preacher, no sermon, no Scripture, nothing and no one will disturb us one little bit. We push Jesus over into a little corner of our lives, or into the cellar of our hearts, close the door and turn the key, thinking that everything will be all right as long as Jesus stays where we put Him.

Go ahead! Roll the stone before the door of your heart. Seal it securely! Try it—just try to confine Jesus to a certain part of your life, or to a certain day of your week. Make it as secure as you can! Keep Christ in the tomb—if you can!

But Jesus is alive! And you can know that Resurrected Lord if you will roll that stone back, and break the seal.

- 1. By acting as though He were not alive
- 2. By confining Him to a certain area of our lives

3 By carefully guarding our lives

How preposterous this was! The chief priests and Pharisees had their temple police guard a dead body! You would think that death would need no guard, that the grave would be security enough all by itself.

But what the enemies of Jesus were afraid of, what they really feared the most, was that Jesus really would come out of that grave—alive! So they set a watch of temple guards in an attempt to make sure that their temporary victory would not be snatched away from them. Some scholars say that as many as sixty guards, working fifteen at a time, guarded the tomb. That is what is preposterous, that they felt that they would need that many soldiers to guard a dead body.

But you and I do the same thing. We guard the tomb of our hearts, with our dead spirits inside, in order to make sure that the Resurrected Jesus will not interfere with us. We might be faithful for a while in coming to worship services and Bible study, and in reading our Bibles, but when we begin to be threatened, when we

begin to hear the claim of Jesus upon our souls, we back up very quickly, retreating back into our tombs, slamming the door and posting a guard to make sure it won't happen again. So the next time we come to church or the next time we read the Bible or the next time someone talks to us about giving our lives to Jesus, the guard we call "Indifference" smiles sweetly and says, "That's nice. What a fine sermon that was! Our little preacher sure preached a fine sermon!" Our guard is up, and we go to great lengths to make excuses and come up with pretty lies in an attempt to avoid the Resurrected Christ. We go to great lengths to post guards around our lives and build barriers around our lives to try to ignore what Jesus did for us and what He demands of us.

"Once there was a spider who lived in a tree. The webs he wove were the strongest, the glossiest, the stickiest webs that a spider could ever construct. Many bugs and beetles, many ants and other insects found themselves caught, quick-dried and stored away in his loaded larder.

"One thing alone troubled his tranquil existence. Close to his tree ran a railroad track, and each morning when the train whooshed by, his whole house shuddered and shook. Sometimes he even lost a few of the tasty tidbits he had intended for a treat.

" 'That's the last straw!' he screamed one day when he found part of his house torn away. 'I'll put a stop to that train! It won't trouble me anymore!'

"That night he spun a long glossy filament that rolled out and out and out. When the wind gave a stronger puff than usual, he leaped into the air and went flying across the tracks to the tree on the other side.

"Now his evil plan began. Back and forth, back and forth from tree to tree he ran, weaving the strongest, the glossiest, the stickiest web any spider could construct. None had ever been so fine, none so strong, so tough, so utterly unbreakable!

" 'I'll seal it with a seal,' he muttered as he glued it doubly fast. 'I'll get some of my friends to guard it as well. They'll make it as sure as they can.'

"The next morning, the 'Hwooooo-hwoooo' of the train could be heard. It was the Logos Express. And it was coming awfully fast.

" 'Hurrah!' laughed the spider. 'What a wreck this will be!'

“ ‘Hwoo-hwooo,’ called the train.

“ ‘Haw! Haw!’ laughed the spider.

“ ‘Hwooo-ooo,’ the train warned.

“Hwoo-WHOOOOOSH.

“ ‘As sure as you can,’ said Pilate.”

--Eileen Lageer, Christianity Today, May 5, 1978, p. 23

Go ahead! Wrap yourself in the shroud of sin and death, and cover up the stench of your iniquities before God! God ahead, and roll the stone of sin before the door of your heart and seal it with a dead conscience. Go ahead, and post a guard to make sure that nothing will interfere with what you want to do!

Go ahead, but you will one day discover that it wasn't Jesus you kept in the tomb. It was yourself. You buried yourself.

When that first Resurrection Day dawned, that shroud was cast aside, the seal was broken as the stone was rolled away, and that guard of soldiers became as dead men. And today on this Resurrection Day, your shroud can be cast aside, and your seal can be broken and your stone rolled away, and your guard can be broken, because the message rings loud and clear—***He is not here! For He is risen, just as He said!***